

Review of Consortium Research Program: Root, tubers, and bananas for food security and income

I am approaching this review with a background in social science and gender. Thus, I am not going to specifically comment on the science regarding plant breeding. I expect that other reviews will bring this expertise to the process.

In addition, I should note that I have reviewed the draft dated 8 September 2010. I was later sent a revised draft. I had already printed out and read the original draft that I was sent. Since I was travelling, it was not possible for me to review the newer version.

Overall, this is a strong proposal. It makes an important case for why a focus on roots, tubers and bananas is critical for reducing poverty.

The research team brings a wealth of experience and scientific expertise to this endeavor. In addition, in some areas, they clearly have strong partnerships with regional, national and local groups, which strengthens the programs. There are many specific components that are strong, such as the data management system (PL4).

The program may be overly ambitious and it is not clear from the proposal how the research will be prioritized. In particular, it is not clear how and why priorities are chosen from among the various crops. The priorities should be based on the possibilities for the greatest impact. This would be a function both of the importance of the crop and the potential for the research to have an impact.

The two major concerns with the proposal are its gender strategy and its weak social science component.

Gender Strategy:

The gender strategy makes it clear that the research team has thought about how this research might impact women. As they note, women are very involved in growing and processing these crops. I am very glad to see that they understand that gender analysis must be included in their work. In particular, recognizing women's labor constraints and contributions, recognizing that women and men may have different preferences over characteristics, and realizing that with increased commercialization, women may lose control over the production of these crops. They propose to do a gender audit. This will be useful. But it isn't clear from the proposal whether there is any social science capability at the research centers and whether there is anyone with gender expertise. The initial steps are outlined, but it is not clear that they will have an impact

on the overall project. It will require careful monitoring and a commitment to address gender issues by everyone involved in this research.

The proposal frequently refers to “poor and women farmers.” The implication is often that women and poor farmers are basically the same group. But these two groups shouldn’t necessarily always be lumped together. It is important to target poor farmers – and to target the poor women farmers. But simply assuming that all women farmers are poor means that many women will be overlooked as possible participants in aspects of scaling up, processing and marketing. The challenge will be to bring both women and men farmers into the sectors of agricultural economy where they can earn greater incomes. It will involve working with some higher potential women farmers and seeing them as not simply “poor.”

In many places in the proposal, it simply recognized that women are important. For example, in section 3.4, “The CRP-RTB will recognize the role of women as producers and as guardian of family nutrition, and the importance of gender-based differences regarding needs, preferences, and opportunities.” While recognition of these issues is an important first step, it is not clear how this recognition will translate into concrete actions. What does it mean for the CRP to recognize it?

For example, on page 29, it says that the first step is to get a gendered understanding. “A gendered understanding of indigenous knowledge and practice will be a key output of on-farm conservation strategies.” This raises two issues. First, how will the gendered understanding come about? Who is going to be involved in this research? What type of research will be done? And second, in what ways might this influence the future projects. Where is this information going to be used? How is it going to feed back into the planning processes?

It will be important to distinguish between women as producers and consumers of RTB. While women are both, they have different implications for research and projects. The proposal tends to lump them together. RTB can contribute to improving nutrition for women, especially pregnant and lactating women and this is mentioned often, especially in the appendices. But improving the nutritional content of RTB does not necessarily involve women’s roles as producers.

There are two sets of gender issues that need to be addressed. One is how women as producers, marketers, and researchers will be targeted. The second is the social science research on gender to understand how gender impacts the production, marketing and consumption of these crops.

Although women are listed as being important, what steps will be taken to ensure that women are included in the “identified target audiences”? (p. 19). How will women be targeted to receive

clean planting materials? Specific gender-based strategies and targets should be listed. How will the capacity building components include women?

Almost 80% of the stakeholders who participated in the assessment were men. And while some of them made comments and suggestions that indicated that they were concerned about women's issues, women were clearly underrepresented as participants. This suggests that it will be important to make conscious, deliberate efforts to include additional women at all stages of the process.

Women are missing in many key places in the proposal. None of the boxes specifically mention women or men. This suggests that a gender lens is not being applied. Box 4.4.2 the project has trained 12,000 smallholder potato growers through the "select the best" training program. How many of these were women? The appendices make almost no mention of specific targets regarding women. There are only one or two places where specific targets of the proportion of farmers to be reached are women.

Social Science Research

The social science part of the proposal is weak overall. This includes both the social science gender research and the social science research more generally. There are several places where a list of possible research questions is presented. But no indication is made of how they would be answered or whether there is the capacity to answer the questions. This in is marked contrast to the research questions for the breeders and other scientists. How will the social science questions be prioritized? How will they impact the breeding programs?

In addition, the proposal notes that it is pro-poor and that the attributes that the breeders will look for will be ones that are pro-poor. What are pro-poor attributes? How will it be determined if attributes are pro-poor? Or pro-women? This is a place where social scientists will be needed.